

The Invisible Scars: Stigma and Identity in Ellen Marie Wiseman's *The Life She Was Given*

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Abstract

*Discrimination is a universal issue that is detrimental for the victims, the social cohesion, the economy and also the perpetrators themselves. On close analysis, one can find that discrimination follows 'stigma' which can be considered as the root cause for the foretold social evil. Stigma mutates the individual with an identity that is often forcefully inflicted upon them. This in turn changes the social identity of the stigmatized which is unequitable. Though studies have been made on stigma by various scholars, it remains to be an unending social, political and psychological barrier that infests the various social structures like country, race, gender, religion and so on. Thus, the need to approach, analyse and confront stigma which furthermore leads to its correspondence with identity and ways to defend it. This paper does the same by analysing Ellen Marie Wiseman's novel *The Life She Was Given* to bring forth a tackle mechanism for stigmatization that further leads to 'enhanced identity'.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The global issue of discrimination and stigma are multifaceted. Discrimination of an individual leads to their stigmatisation on a surface level. But in the deeper sense, the stigma inflicted upon the individual mutates their social identity which is unequitable. In 1963, Erving Goffman initiated the debate of stigma and discrimination in his pioneering book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Though the study on discrimination and stigma has been ongoing for decades, it still prevails to be an unending social evil. This paper attempts to approach, analyse and confront stigma by analysing Ellen Marie Wiseman's novel *The Life She Was Given* (2017) to bring forth a tackle mechanism for stigmatisation that further leads to 'enhanced identity'.

Ellen Marie Wiseman is a contemporary American novelist known for her selection of historical and cultural representation in a modernist setting. She has published five novels that deal with themes like humanity, gender inequality, identity denial, domestic abuse, war, racism and so on. Her novel *The Life She Was Given* (2017) deals about the importance of identity and sense of belonging through

her depiction of the life of circus performers. Lilly, an albinistic nine-year-old girl is locked up in the attic and later sold to a circus by her mother, Coralline. Coralline thinks that her daughter is a monster and convinces Lilly to believe the same which compromises her developing identity. Later Coralline brings up Lilly's daughter, Julia as her own by cloaking up her real identity of her birth mother. This later turns her into a rebel teenager who runs away. This novel is a portrayal of psychological and sociological effects of abusive parenthood, identity formation and social identity denial due to stigma, its aftermath and how it is overcome.

II. PERCEIVED STIGMA

In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman states that 'Stigma' is a Greek word which refers to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier (2009). It is the term given to the mark or stain imprinted on an individual to denote that the specific person is deviated from the standardised spectrum of the world. "It is a powerful social process of devaluing people or groups

on a real or perceived difference” (Futures Group Global). Wiseman portrays how stigma can affect an individual on a psychological level through the characters of Lilly and Julia. Coralline locks up Lilly in the attic since her birth and denies her the right to a normal life because she thinks of her daughter as a “monster, an abomination” (Wiseman, 2017, p. 5) while it is only a genetic disorder on which Lilly has no control over. She stigmatises her as an abomination and also makes her believe the same. After she is sold to the circus, Lilly is always afraid that the circus performers and the audience would be afraid of her and think her to be a monster. Julia on the other hand, is raised by Coralline in a strict environment and encircles Julia with unjust rules imposed on a child. She blames Julia for whatever mishappenings she faces with the justification that it happens only because of Julia’s undisciplined nature and breaking of her rules. She even blames Julia for her father’s drinking disorder and his eventual death by accident. Coralline imprints Julia for her rebellious and ungrateful behaviour when in reality Julia behaves the way she does only because she is afraid of her so-called ‘mother’. This stigma inflicted upon her changes her into an actual rebel as a teenager who runs away from her family and leads an unruly life.

According to López-Ibor, “Stigma is a brand. To brand is to mark indelibly as a sign of quality. To brand is also to impress indelibly on one’s memory, therefore the stigma is both in the stigmatised person and in the stigmatising one” (2002, p. 23). After so many years of infertility, Coralline being a religious fanatic, prays to the devil to sell her soul if she conceives a child. Therefore, Lilly, a child with genetic disorder is misinterpreted as a curse on Coralline for deviating from her faith. This makes an invisible mark on Coralline herself, a self-stigmatisation which infuses her with guilt and hatred upon herself that is projected on Lilly. Wiseman with the use of her third person narrative emphasises the same on the character of Coralline as “the grief in her eyes turned to anger and hate” (Wiseman, 2017, p.18). Her conduct on Lilly is purely her own regret for breaking her faith. However, her abuse over Julia is a result of her regret for not having a ‘normal’ child while Lilly did. Raising Julia by cloaking the true identity of her mother, Lilly, is to cover up her self-stigma proving that stigma is marked both on the stigmatised and the stigmatiser.

Based upon the foretold analysis, one can count Coralline’s character to be stigmatised also to understand what makes her character different from Lilly and Julia can be explained with Goffman’s characterisation of stigma in two levels - the discredited and the discreditable (2009, p. 6). In the first case, Goffman refers to the stigma that can be easily ascertained or visible to the naked eye such as

physical deformities, ailments, mental disorders and so on. Lilly’s albinism can be taken as a discredited stigma since she is perceived as a monster because of her difference in appearance. While the latter refers to the stigma that is often concealed or is brought to light only upon a personal reveal or someone else finding it out such as psychological issues, addiction and radical political views. Julia’s rebelliousness and childhood abuse, Coralline’s extreme religious faith leading to her stigmatising her own daughter can be categorised as a discreditable stigma since they are unknown to the world until Julia finds out about her true identity leading to reasoning out the behaviour of Coralline, then it becomes discredited.

III. IMPACT OF STIGMA ON IDENTITY

The forceful infliction of stigma upon an individual hinders their social identity and categorises them into a bound circle of shame. This identity denial that stigmatisation inflicts upon them restricts their involvement in the society. In the novel, Lilly is kept locked in the attic all her life due to her “overt or external deformity” (López-Ibor, 2002) making it difficult for her to truly develop an identity of her own. She questions her identity as to why she had to live an invisible life away from the rest of the world and doubts if she will ever be accepted amongst the ‘normal’ people. “She just wanted to know what made her a monster” (Wiseman, 2017, p. 8). After she is sold to the circus, she faces the world for the first time and thinks that she will be rejected by everybody when they find out that she is a ‘monster’. But it is only when the circus performers treat her like a normal person, she starts to understand her identity. They accept her without any stigmatisation because the circus people have faced the same oppression as that of Lilly before they entered the circus industry. They created a separate encircle of their own to deviate from the denial and subjection they have faced before becoming a circus performer. Lilly finds her identity only in the midst of the people who accept and value her.

Though Coralline compromises both Lilly and Julia’s identity through her abusive parenthood, Lilly gets the chance to analyse about herself and create an individuality when she enters into an environment that accepts her for who she is. She explores herself when she feels included in the midst of her fellow circus performers. On the other hand, Julia believes that “maybe mother was right. You (Julia) aren’t going to amount to anything. So, what’s the point of trying?” (Wiseman, 2017, p. 16). She feels that she deserves the troublesome and bad life that she leads after leaving her home. Unlike Lilly, Julia is denied the chance even after she runs away from her house.

She is constantly anxious and questions about her life and why Coralline treated her the way she did. The unanswered questions about her upbringing and her parents abusive attitude makes it difficult for her to understand herself. Thus, compromising her identity. She is able to understand her life only after she finds out about her family's past and the reason behind Coralline's behaviour towards her.

IV. ENHANCED IDENTITY

As analysed above, stigmatisation leads to identity denial. Though, however unfortunate, one cannot stop the person with prejudice rather it is wise to approach one's stigma and convert it to the positivity of the self. Both Lilly and Julia use nature as the compensation mechanism to fight their stigma and turn it into a "positive label" (Gamliel & Hazan). Lilly's self-awareness about her stigma begins only after she is set free among the people of her own world. She explores herself by comparing herself with the circus animals. She gets rid of her psychological wounds from her past and creates a new identity for herself as a wife, a mother and an amazing circus performer. She becomes the famous "albino queen" (Wiseman, 2017, p.263). Julia on the other hand, who struggles to find her identity, copes up with her past trauma by connecting and comparing herself with the horses in her barn. She takes in the fouls that are rejected by their mares since she sees them as her own self who was rejected by her mother. By taking care of the fouls, she concurs with her past and develops an 'enhanced identity'.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the novel, it is ascertained that by branding them to be different and restricting their chance at a normal life, the characters are denied the opportunity to develop an identity of their own. Their life could be different if Lilly and Julia were treated without repression. Thus, by stigmatising we not only deny them identity but also a better chance at living their life. Stigmatiser will not gain anything but the sense of power, but the stigmatised gets a life. However, the invisible scar of stigma can be put to control only when there is an awareness of how and why they are stigmatised which should be followed by agreeing that they are bigger than their imposed mark and concurring with it. Following these should further create the sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy that leads the stigmatised towards attaining an enhanced identity.

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